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PERSONALITY CORRELATES OF RETICENT AND  
NONRETICENT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

A Thesis

Presented to the  
Department of Speech  
and the  
Faculty of the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by

Nancy Adele Mohrlock

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Accepted for the faculty of the Graduate College of the  
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requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

Graduate Committee

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PERSONALITY CORRELATES OF RETICENT AND  
NONRETICENT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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The development of communication skills is vital to socialization in the classroom and to personality development. Petty and Starkey (1966) suggest that language is the greatest force for socialization that exists and at the same time is the most potent single factor in the development of individuality. Rosenberg and Coopersmith (1965, 1967) showed that a person's verbal behavior will influence others' attitudes toward him, while Mead (1934) indicated that an individual's behavior is affected by the kind of image that he has of himself. This image comes largely from the individual's perceptions of others' attitudes toward himself until he conceptualizes a "generalized other" based on his experiences in a special social environment. Should the generalized other be based on negative considerations, he will use his perceptions of others' reactions to form a rationale for his behavior. It is likely that if a student has problems communicating effectively or views communication as a painful experience, he will not be a participating member of the class.

Phillips (1965) identifies, defines, and elaborates upon the problem communicator as follows:

Operationally, the problem communicator shows no distortions in articulation, nor does he reveal the hypertonia associated with stuttering. He is unusually quiet and tends to avoid interaction. He is reluctant to discuss ideas and problems with others and seems inordinately intimidated by superordinates. He rarely asks questions, does not socialize well, and his physical upsets often are associated with his attempts to communicate. Though he may be able to handle minimal communicative requirements, face-to-face contact with others normally threatens him. He does not anticipate success in communicative transactions involving speech. He may be defined as a person for whom anxiety about participation in oral communication outweighs his projection of gain from the situation. He may or may not be consciously aware of what he has at stake when he communicates with others. He is quite aware, however, of his incapability and consequently seeks to avoid interactions rather than participate. He knows that he does not react as others do in personalized communicative situations. This awareness often pushes him to seek occupations and activities that will spare him from communicating, where his peers choose such activities on a basis of interest or commitment without much concern for the communicative requirements (Phillips, 1965, pp. 39-40). In short, the problem communicator or the reticent student seeks to avoid verbal communication where the avoidance is not caused by physical impairment of the speech mechanism.

Moreover, the reticent student's problems mount as he advances through school where he is expected to show greater and greater verbalization, openness, and assertiveness. In turn, the



reticent student anguishes in his lack of communication and withdraws even further.

Mead's "generalized other" (1934) has been discussed with relation to reticence. Lippitt and Gold (1959) suggest that the self evaluation of an individual tended to correspond to the feelings about him expressed by peers. The teacher's attitude toward the student is affected by how the teacher perceives the student. According to Jecker, Maccoby, Breitrose, and Rose (1964), it is possible to incorrectly evaluate a student negatively because that student appears to be lacking in intellectual ability. A teacher's feelings are communicated to the student in question and to his peers. Sears and Sherman (1964) feel that the teacher's attitude about a student affects his behavior and also peer attitude toward him.

Wilson (1969) found that the students who were described as ineffective communicators were also the students measuring the lowest in self-esteem. The silence common in these individuals appeared to be due to anxiety and fear of failure. Similarly, Crowell, Ketcher, and Miyamoto (1955) found that students with low self concepts differed in self confidence with regard to communicative ability. Students low in class participation and low in self esteem were shown by Lippitt and Gold (1959) to be those students with inadequate communication skills. Coopersmith (1959) disclosed that students with low self-esteem were more apprehensive about expressing unpopular or unusual ideas, and more prone to being self-conscious "about talking in front of everyone."

Phillips (1965) and Phillips and Butt (1966) found that individuals with communication problems, i.e., reticence, have a higher

than average anxiety level. Muir (1964) had explored this idea and reported that reticent students expressed anxiety in communication situations and participated less in school and community groups because of their anxiety. Although in theory fear and anxiety are distinct, they seem to be highly interrelated. Suinn (1968) noted that reductions in overall fears accompanied decreases in anxiety in students treated for test anxiety. Lang and Lazovik (1963) and Grossberg (1964) reported significant positive correlations between scores on the Fear Survey Schedule and the Manifest Anxiety scale. Geer and Katkin (1966) found that fears contribute substantially to generalized anxiety in students with communication problems. Thus, the variable of anxiety is related to reticence primarily because of the anxiety producing situation that oral communication creates.

Nemeth (1970) reported that a person generally likes and helps one who has helped him and dislikes one who has harmed him. Consequently, it may be expected that the reticent student would have less affiliation tendency perhaps because of the communication experiences he has had with friends, parents, counselors, etc. that proved unsuccessful. Coates and Mazur (1969) surveyed friendship pairs in hopes of finding affiliation tendency among close friends. Affiliation was found to be a significant variable if the individuals in the pair thought the other member to have characteristics with which he could positively identify. Shapiro and Alexander (1969) worked with introverts and extroverts and the variables affiliation and anxiety. Anxious introverts, certainly a reasonable adjective for the reticent, had less desire to affiliate than did anxious

extroverts or nonanxious introverts. Mehrabian (1970) found that individuals of a higher status elicited more affiliation than those of lower status, and reported that persons sensitive to rejection were less willing to associate with others, especially those with differing opinions and attitudes than their own. Since the reticent student undoubtedly views himself to be of lower status, it is expected that he would exhibit a low need for affiliation.

Rotter (1966) conceptualized man's perceptions of his control over the environment with the Internal-External Locus of Control Scale. Internal control is the view held by an individual that he is in active control of his rewards while external control is the view that one is in total submission to the elements controlling him. Individuals who assume internal control exhibit a greater effort to determine the direction one will take. These individuals seem to be more achievement oriented toward progress and success. Individuals who assume external control are usually part of the more marginal groups in our society. The external perceptions are seen as being in a restricted field of alternative where there is little chance for any role other than that of total dependence on a possibly capricious and absolute authority. This individual feels that every decision, plan, movement is controlled by forces other than himself and out of his own command. Seeman (1959) links powerlessness in the sense of alienation to external control-indicating that the external individual is not only distant from the workings of his environment, but does not feel he has the power to govern himself, thus overwhelming himself with fears of failure and inadequacy. Lefcourt (1966) found

that when individuals are involved in situations where personal competence can effect the outcome they tend to perform more actively and adequately than when situations appear less controllable to them; an estimate of their performance in that situation is automatic and evaluation completes the process. Positive reinforcement increases the possibility of positive behavior.

The reticent student conceptualizes himself as inferior and less successful than his peers. As a result of this self-fulfilling prophecy, he exhibits less verbalization in communication situations. "Performing" or speaking is viewed as a task to be avoided. Self-esteem, fear, and manifested anxiety deter output and performance. Lefcourt and Ladwig (1965) concluded that subjects could be led to perform tasks more adequately than they had performed them before; hopefully the performance improvements would eventually lead to a change in generalized expectancies. Thus the reticent student, after having success speaking could be led to speak more often, minimize anxiety, and begin to feel a measure of self assurance. Franklin (1963) found a significant relationship between the Internal-external Locus of Control Scale and reported evidence of achievement motivation. Similarly, Efran (1963) reported that the external individual has less need to "repress" his failure since he attributes the external world as determining his success or failure to a greater extent than the internal individual. The behaviors exhibited by the subject scoring high in external control should be the same behaviors manifested in the reticent student.

Zuckerman (1964) developed the sensation seeking scale in order to identify individuals who approach or avoid novel stimuli. Zuckerman and Link (1968) characterized low sensation seekers as introverted, affiliative, valuing predictability, order and self control. High sensation seekers are described as extroverted, independent, liking change and impulsive. Farley (1967) speculated that the sensation seeking scale may be of value in predicting individual differences in risk taking and social interaction. For the reticent student the risks of social interaction increase and magnify his problem at every verbal encounter. Thus the risk of failure could cause avoidance of many social contacts and reduce the desire for sensation seeking. The introversion-extroversion language of the sensation seeking dimension suggests that reticent students would be low sensation seekers while nonreticent students would be high sensation seekers.

In summary, because the reticent individual suffers from high anxiety and low self-esteem, it is hypothesized that he will exhibit a low affiliative motive in his attempt to isolate himself from the ridicule and derisiveness which he expects to experience in interpersonal settings which demand verbal activity. On the other hand, the nonreticent individuals should possess low anxiety, high self esteem and a high need for affiliation. In addition, the reticent individual is expected to exhibit an external locus of control and low sensation seeking, while the nonreticent individual is expected to maintain an internal locus of control and a high degree of sensation seeking.

## Method

### Subjects

Subjects were taken from the student body of the Omaha Public School System. Twenty of the subjects were students enrolled in a required high school speech course at a large urban high school with a population of approximately 1900 students. These students represent a variety of socio-economic levels, races, ages, familial associations and aptitude.

Twenty subjects of this study were enrolled in an Individualized Study Center, a school designed for students who cannot exist in a regular academic environment. Reasons for attending the Study Center are often pregnancy, truancy, truancy leading to suspension from regular school, discipline problems, anti-social behavior, and fear of contact and interaction with groups. This school offers a complete academic curriculum, taught on a one-to-one basis by certified Omaha Public School teachers.

Selection of these forty subjects was based on their individual scores on the Pedersen Reticence Survey (1967). One teacher from the Individualized Study Center evaluated the communication of all of her students ( $N = 28$ ). The same procedure was followed by a teacher at the high school ( $N = 98$ ). From each school only students who received the maximum score of seventy (reticent) or the minimum score of seven (nonreticent) were considered. As a result, four groups of ten subjects each were formed. The subjects were matched on the following variables: age, sex, race, number of parents in the home and aptitude. From these matched pairs, ten study center

nonreticent and ten nonreticent high school students were selected for further investigation.

### Personality Measures and Procedures

The Internal-External Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966), the affiliation and abasement scales of the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (1959), the Zuckerman Sensation Seeking Scale (1964), and the Manifest Anxiety-Defensiveness Scale (Millimet, 1970) were administered to all subjects.

The high school students were given the internal-external scale, affiliation and abasement scales, and the sensation-seeking scale, in that order, on the same day during their assigned class period. They were told that this information was to determine the feelings, thoughts and preferences of high school students. They were told that the information would have no bearing on their grades and no one would know the scores each subject received as each subject was requested to omit his name on each answer sheet. The Millimet Anxiety Defensiveness Scale was given on the following day.

The students at the Individualized Study Center were given the tests in the same order with the same information given to them. However, each student took the test alone in a study carrel.

### Results

A 2(Reticence-Nonreticence) x 2(Study Center-High School) factorial analysis of variance was used to analyze each of the five personality scales. Mean values for each personality scale may be found in Tables 1 to 5.

Table 1

Mean Internal-External Locus of Control Score for

Reticent and Nonreticent High School Students

GROUPS	STUDY CENTER	HIGH SCHOOL	COMBINED MEAN
Non Reticent	10.3	10.4	10.35
Reticent	11.7	12.4	12.05
Combined Mean	11.0	11.4	



Table 2  
Mean Affiliation Scores for Reticent and Nonreticent  
High School Students

GROUPS	STUDY CENTER	HIGH SCHOOL	COMBINED MEAN
Non Reticent	7.2	6.1	6.6
Reticent	7.7	8.1	7.9
Combined Mean	7.45	7.1	

Table 3

Mean Abasement Scores for Reticent and

Nonreticent High School Students

GROUPS	STUDY CENTER	HIGH SCHOOL	COMBINED MEAN
Non Reticent	5.3	4.5	4.9
Reticent	5.2	5.7	5.4
Combined Mean	5.25	5.1	

Table 4

Mean Sensation Seeking Scores for Reticent and

Nonreticent High School Students

GROUPS	STUDY CENTER	HIGH SCHOOL	COMBINED MEAN
Non Reticent	11.5	10.2	10.85
Reticent	9.4	7.8	8.6
Combined Mean	10.4	9.0	

Table 5  
Mean Anxiety Scores for Reticent and Nonreticent  
High School Students

GROUPS	STUDY CENTER	HIGH SCHOOL	COMBINED MEAN
Non Reticent	34.4	23.0	28.7
Reticent	33.1	28.2	30.6
Combined Mean	33.7	25.5	

Table 6

Frequency Sex, Race, Age, Parents in Home and Aptitude

for Reticent and Nonreticent High School Students

GROUPS	STUDY CENTER	HIGH SCHOOL
Non Reticent	6 females 4 males 6 white 4 black 6 16 years old 4 15 years old 7 live with both parents 2 live with mother 1 live with father 2 above average aptitude 7 average aptitude 1 below average aptitude	6 females 4 males 7 white 3 black 4 16 years old 6 15 years old 8 live with both parents 2 live with mother 0 live with father 2 above average aptitude 7 average aptitude 1 below average aptitude
Reticent	5 females 5 males 6 white 4 black 5 16 years old 5 15 years old 8 live with both parents 2 live with mother 0 live with father 2 above average aptitude 7 average aptitude 1 below average aptitude	5 females 5 males 6 white 4 black 0 16 years old 10 15 years old 8 live with both parents 2 live with mother 0 live with father 2 above average aptitude 7 average aptitude 1 below average aptitude

Internal-External Locus of Control. The main effect of reticence ( $F = 2.22$ ,  $df = 1/36$ ,  $p < .25$ ), the main effect of schools ( $F < 1$ ) and the interaction effect ( $F < 1$ ) were not statistically significant.

Affiliation. The main effect of reticence was statistically significant ( $F = 4.34$ ,  $df = 1/36$ ,  $p < .05$ ) indicating opposite to expectation that reticent students have a greater need for affiliation than the nonreticent students. Neither the main effect of schools ( $F < 1$ ) or the interaction effect ( $F = 1.56$ ,  $df = 1/36$ ) were statistically significant.

Abasement. The main effect of reticence ( $F = 1.21$ ,  $df = 1/36$ ), the main effect of schools ( $F < 1$ ), and the interaction effect ( $F = 1.68$ ,  $df = 1/36$ ) were not statistically significant.

Sensation Seeking. The main effect of reticence ( $F = 2.98$ ,  $df = 1/36$ ,  $p < .10$ ) approached statistical significance. This result was consistent with expectation that reticent students possess lower sensation seeking than the nonreticent students. The main effect of schools ( $F = 1.24$ ,  $df = 1/36$ ) and the interaction effect ( $F < 1$ ) were not statistically significant.

Trait Anxiety. The main effect of schools ( $F = 3.43$ ,  $df = 1/36$ ,  $p < .07$ ) was statistically significant indicating that the study center students were higher in trait anxiety than the high school students. The main effect of reticence ( $F = 1.54$ ,  $df = 1/36$ ) and the interaction effect ( $F < 1$ ) were not statistically significant.

### Discussion

Because the abasement (acceptance of guilt) internal-external locus of control (ability to control or command one's life), or trait anxiety were not statistically significant effects, it may be understood that reticent students feel no more guilt, anxiety, or lack of personal control than nonreticent students.

It appears that the initial conception of associating the reticent student with maladjustment was unjustified. This is not to say that the reticent student does not have problems unique to him, but these difficulties seem to be more associated with his self-imposed introversion and low affiliative tendencies. In this regard, it had been expected that the need for affiliation would be lower in the reticent student. Yet, the opposite effect was found. Because the reticent student exhibited a higher need for affiliation it may be inferred that the deprivation schedule associated with low interpersonal contact has caused the affiliation need to increase. These individuals are living in a world apart from others in which warm interpersonal experiences and the maintenance of friendships are lacking. Due to this lack of interpersonal activity the reticent student senses what he is missing and professes a need for it, resulting in a high affiliation score. The low sensation seeking score in the reticent student confirms his introversion tendencies, thus providing the basis for his affiliation need.

The results of this study imply that the portrayal of the reticent student as a tormented and desperately unhappy individual as pictured in the introduction cannot be supported. It would appear

that personal adjustment is uncorrelated with reticence, which is best viewed in terms of introversion primarily. No doubt some reticent students are marginally adjusted, but the same marginal adjustment would be true of some nonreticent students as well. The Pedersen Scale is noted for its ability to separate the more outspoken, assertive student from his more introverted counterpart. Nothing else need be implied by this selection except for those personality variables which affirm the reticence dimension such as low sensation seeking. Because reticent students are less verbally assertive is no reason to create an image of them as personally disturbed.

If there is a group of students who possess characteristics of low self esteem and low personal adjustment, it is the study center students as a whole. This conclusion follows from the significant school effect for trait anxiety. This finding is confirmation for the concerns which led to these students being enrolled in the study center for individualized instruction. Previous research (e.g., Millimet, 1972) has noted the strong relationship between trait anxiety and personal adjustment. Moreover, because the study center is the last academic placement for these students, an element of additional anxiety must be injected for many of them because they know they must succeed if they wish to receive a diploma. This diploma serves as a reward for academic achievement, ability to function in groups, socialization skills, and verbal abilities. Many students graduate from high school still lacking in one or more of these areas.



The reticent, introverted student needs to be discovered early in his academic career, drawn from his solitude, and given experiences to alleviate the reticent condition. In order for that to take place education needs to take a personal, individual, scrutinizing look at its practices and procedures for seeking out and helping students before their problem becomes too severe for them to cope with.

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